

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Feb. 13, 2006**

**For More Information Contact**

**VDH 06-08**

Elizabeth Barrett, DMD, Manager Oral Health Promotion, 804-864-7775

Charles Ford, PIO, 804-864-7668

**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH FIGHTS TOOTH DECAY  
THE MOST COMMON CHRONIC DISEASE AMONG CHILDREN**

*February is National Children's Dental Health Month*

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among children, up to five times more common than asthma, the second-ranked childhood chronic disease. The National Oral Health Policy Center at UCLA estimates that by age 5, 50 percent of children in the United States have tooth decay. A 1999 Virginia Department of Health (VDH) assessment of first, third and tenth grade Virginia students revealed that 54 percent had tooth decay.

The consequences of tooth decay may lead to more widespread health problems. Infants with tooth decay grow at a slower pace than those who don't have tooth decay. Some young children with tooth decay may be severely underweight because chewing food may be too painful or they lose their appetite, according to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD).

A major source of tooth decay among young children, according to the AAPD, is their mothers or caregivers who have untreated tooth decay. Decay-causing bacteria are transmitted to children when the mothers or caregivers share eating utensils with the children, clean pacifiers or bottle nipples with their saliva and kiss their babies on the mouth. Poor feeding habits such as offering soda, milk or juice in baby bottles at bedtime also contribute significantly to tooth decay among children. Inadequate oral hygiene practices such as not brushing and flossing regularly also allow bacteria to remain on teeth and gums.

Daily at-home attention to the dental needs of children is highly effective in preventing tooth decay. Following are several steps parents can take to protect their children's teeth.

- Do not share eating utensils with your child or clean nipples or pacifiers with your saliva. These practices can spread decay-causing bacteria.
- Do not put your baby to sleep with a bottle containing anything but water. Other beverages that linger on the teeth increase the risk of tooth decay.
- Start your baby using a cup at about 6 months of age. Wean them from the bottle by age 1. Continued bottle use increases the risk of tooth decay.
- Clean your baby's first teeth twice a day with water on a damp cloth or soft brush.
- Establish a relationship with a dentist for your child and schedule the first dental visit by your baby's first birthday. Starting early helps ensure that problems are detected and corrected promptly.
- Give children healthy snacks of fruits and vegetables instead of sweets.
- Ask your dentist about dental sealants for your child's permanent molars

(more)

Preventing tooth decay and improving the health of children is a major effort of VDH's Office of Family Health Services Division of Dental Health, which uses a variety of techniques and approaches to combat the disease.

"Fluoridating public drinking water can reduce tooth decay by up to 40 percent. It is our best defense against tooth decay," said Karen Day, D.D.S., director of the Division of Dental Health.

VDH works with localities to provide fluoridated drinking water to nearly 6 million of Virginia's approximately 7 million residents at an average annual cost of about 50 cents per person. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, every \$1 invested in community water fluoridation saves \$38 in treatment costs. VDH provides funds to localities to purchase fluoridation equipment and educates residents and community leaders on the benefits of fluoridation.

VDH's School Fluoride Mouth Rinse Program provides fluoride to children in grades one through five who live in localities that don't have fluoridated drinking water. Each week during the school year, more than 46,000 children in 52 counties "swish and spit" a liquid fluoride solution that helps protect their teeth against cavities. The average cost of the program is about \$2 per child per year. A 1990 study in one Virginia county school system showed a 15 percent to 20 percent reduction in the number of cavities among children who participated in system's mouth rinse program.

The Bright Smiles for Babies program protects children's teeth against decay by applying fluoride varnish to the teeth of low-income infants and pre-schoolers who have a high risk for developing decay in their baby teeth. Fluoride varnish is a new preventive product and the only one that can be used safely and effectively on the teeth of very young children. The program has the potential to reduce decay 40 percent to 60 percent among young, low-income children. Since July when it began, the program has concentrated on reaching children in Virginia's 13 Early Head Start Programs. Three of VDH's health districts have started the program and staff members in three other districts have been trained in techniques to apply the varnish. Plans include expanding the program to other public and private settings in the near future.

Another weapon in the health department's fight against tooth decay is dental sealants, a thin acrylic-like material that VDH dental staff paints on the chewing surfaces of permanent molars. Sealants form a physical bond with tooth enamel and cover tiny pits and fissures, resulting in a smooth surface that can easily be cleaned with a toothbrush. Studies show that sealants can last up to 10 years and are 100 percent effective in preventing decay on the chewing surfaces of teeth. In 2005, VDH applied sealants to approximately 20,000 teeth of children in its clinics.

For more information about these and other programs to protect the health of your family, visit [www.vdh.virginia.gov](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov) and click on Healthy Living.

###